

Guidelines for Writing the Prospectus of a Dissertation

While the final format of the prospectus should be determined by the PhD candidate and his/her dissertation director, here are a few guidelines which provide an idea of what is usually expected from such a document. If the candidate and the director agree upon it, any point described below can be altered, redefined or suppressed. (The indications of length are particularly flexible: the whole prospectus can range from about 10 to 25 pages.)

General remarks :

In writing a prospectus, your purpose is to convince the members of your committee that you have a valid topic of research and that you are (or know how to become) equipped to pursue this research successfully.

Even if you need to have done research before writing the prospectus, it is only a *preliminary document* in the etymological meaning of the word : you write it *before passing the threshold* which leads you into your research itself. While parts of the prospectus can be reused untouched in chapters of your dissertation, most students realize, as they progress in their research, that some parts of their original projects have to be modified, expanded, abandoned, etc. A prospectus is not written in stone : in consultation with your advisor, you can always alter even important parts of your project. Note that, while it is also possible to modify the title of your dissertation once it has been registered, it is a little more cumbersome, institutionally speaking. So try to pay extra care to the few words in the title, but don't feel "forever tied" by the actual content of the prospectus, nor should you agonize about every word of it. Nobody will ever see it after you have defended it. However, the more carefully the prospectus defines the topic, the better the candidate is prepared to work it out in the dissertation.

Remember that you have now passed all the examinations : during the prospectus (or the dissertation) defense, your committee members are not here to test you, but to help you. Their advice and criticisms will never be designed to prove you incompetent, but to suggest other ways to approach your topic, other aspects to see in your corpus, other methodological possibilities.

On a practical level, remember also that you should always give a few weeks for your committee members to read and evaluate your prospectus. So if you are under a deadline (an application for a Mellon, Lawler or other fellowship, the end of the semester, etc.), be sure to count these extra weeks in your schedule.

Remember finally that if you wish to write your dissertation in French, you need to request a special authorization from the dean before your prospectus can be accepted. In your request, you must explain why it makes more sense to write your text in French than in English (because of your sources, the secondary readings, the inherent "untranslatability" of the notions you have to use, etc. : not having a good enough command of English is *not* a valid argument. Indeed, the department requires a good working command of both languages.)

Form of the prospectus :

a) **A brief statement in which you present the overall object of your research** (one paragraph). You will have to provide such a paragraph to officially register your dissertation topic at an office centralizing the dissertation projects currently in progress in US universities. Try to be as succinct, and yet as complete as possible. It may be a good idea to write this paragraph last, once the composition of the whole prospectus has allowed you to develop your thought fully. Try to synthesize it in a nutshell (i.e., in 10 lines or so).

b) **A description of your corpus** (1-3 pages). Which literary texts, films, cultural documents are you going to take as the object of your study. Since you have already presented your topic, you can specify how each item (or group of items) in your corpus relates to this topic, and how it will serve you in investigating an original dimension of the topic.

c) **A survey of the secondary literature** (1-3 pages). Present as synthetically as possible what has already been written about your corpus by previous scholars. Try to bundle these scholars into groups, and specify what each group has brought to your topic, which approaches have already been developed, which aspects of the corpus have already been investigated.

d) **An explanation of the originality of your project** (3-6 pages). After having surveyed what *other* scholars have done, explain what you propose to do with this corpus. Do it by differentiating your approach, your assumptions, your choices, your ambitions, from those of the existing studies. This is the place where you can discuss at greater length your methodological *parti-pris*, your polemical stance, what you hope will be "new" and "original" in your contribution to the scholarly discussion.

e) **A glimpse at the potential stakes of your project** (1/3 - 1 page). Consider what, in your project, could interest readers exterior to the narrow field you have chosen. If your project, as you conceive it now, was finished and published as a book, what would you write on the back cover, to entice "the general reader" to take a look at it. In other words: suggest what, in your argument, could be (theoretically, politically, historically, philosophically, aesthetically) relevant *beyond* the highly specific corpus and object you have isolated.

f) **A tentative chapter-by-chapter structure** (2-15 pages). You can already have a very specific idea of how you will organize your final text, of how your multidimensional topic will be arranged to fit the linearity of your dissertation. In this case, describe as precisely as you can what will be the content and the specificity of each chapter. Or — more commonly — you will not be sure in exactly how many chapters you will divide your dissertation. In this case, try to regroup "what you have to say" into large sections, and try to arrange them in an order that makes some sense. This order will probably change as your research unfolds. But it is useful to ask yourself which structural principle seems best fitted to your work (one chapter per author, a pairing of authors within each chapter, a progression organized by themes, an order following the historical chronology, etc.).

g) A bibliography (2-5 pages). Apart from the texts selected as your corpus, collect the secondary studies that you have managed to gather so far. You don't have to have read everything before the discussion of the prospectus (it may be a good idea to mark the items you have already read with a "x"). The purpose of this bibliography is to show your committee what you have found to be relevant to your topic among the preexisting scholarly discussions, so that the committee members can make suggestions to add items they consider important or to delete others which appear to them a waste of your time.